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Original Research Article

Representation of the Characteristics of Iranian Miniature Painting in Western Art History

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Abstract

Introduction: Iranian miniature painting, as a significant artistic discipline in Iran, has been the subject of study since the 19th century, fueled by the growing interest of Western collectors and experts. Like all forms of painting, writing the history of this discipline relies on recognizing its characteristics and analyzing various artworks. Therefore, it is essential to explore the development of this branch of art history and revisit the foundations of what is often accepted as obvious today. This study aims at understanding how Western art historians have identified and interpreted the distinctive features of Iranian painting. By focusing on Western publications from 1876 to 1930, it examines how the diverse specialties of scholars influenced the production of this body of historical knowledge. The main question revolves around how the characteristics of Iranian Painting were identified, systematized, and explained within the context of Western art history

Research Method: With a developmental goal, this qualitative research is based on literature review and library data collection. It describes, analyzes and interprets data found on the characteristics of Iranian Miniature in primary sources Western publications.

Findings: The historiography of Iranian miniatures in this period has shifted from explaining visual features (such as the use of bright colors) to expressing qualitative features while the approaches of «objectification» and «artistic masterpiece» are present in all of the aforementioned studies regarding Iranian miniatures.

Conclusion: This study demonstrates that understanding the characteristics and history of Iranian miniatures during this period is influenced by the diversity of specializations of its contributors.

Keywords

Art History, Iranian Miniature, History of Miniature Painting, Characteristics of Miniature Painting, Western Art Historians

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Introduction and Problem Definition

From the early 20th century until the First World War, the study of Islamic art expanded significantly, providing Western scholars with unprecedented access to a wealth of information and visual data. This led to more in-depth analyses of Islamic art. During this period, several significant exhibitions were held, including the Munich Islamic Art Exhibition in 1910 and the Exhibition of Iranian Art at Burlington House in London. In the 1930s, pioneering publications on Iranian arts, such as works by Arthur U. Pope and Basil Gray were released. These publications were part of a broader trend but often adopted a holistic approach that examined all branches of art simultaneously —often at the expense of analytical depth due to superficial accumulation of knowledge. A significant turning point in the study of Iranian miniature painting occurred with Alois Musil's discovery of the Umrah Palace murals in 1898, which sparked interest in Islamic painting. Joseph Toussaint Reinaud's two-volume Monumens Arabes, Persans et Turcs du Cabinet de M. le Duc Blacas et D'Autres Cebinets was the first to examine an entire collection of Islamic decorative arts. Despite its pre-Islamic roots, Iranian miniature painting is primarily classified as a subcategory of Islamic arts and is studied within the broader context of Islamic art history. This creates an intersection where the history of Iranian miniature can be analyzed alongside Islamic art history and Iranian art history. Although painting is a significant branch of art in Iran, it has received relatively little attention in historiography of art, with limited studies on the evolution of its history and its analytical aspects. As the field of art history continues to develop, our understanding of various art forms evolves, expands, and, occasionally, faces challenges. If we regard Iranian miniature as a distinct branch of painting defined by specific temporal and geographical boundaries, we must also consider its unique characteristics. These characteristics help us understand and articulate the essence of this art. Our current knowledge of Iranian miniature has undergone several transformations, validating our contemporary understanding. One important task of art historians is to examine these transformations and trace the development of historical knowledge, a process known as historiography[1]. The need to uncover the origins of our historical knowledge has motivated the authors to investigate how early histories of Iranian Miniature were written. In this regard, the present study conducts a chronological review of early publications to explore how the characteristics of Iranian miniature were recognized and interpreted in Western literature. In fact, this has been the most specialized field of study for Iranian miniature. This investigation does not aim to provide a comprehensive historical survey of every publication related to miniature painting; rather, it addresses the recognition and presentation of the distinguishing features of this art. The central question in this inquiry explores how the unique characteristics of Iranian painting have been identified, compiled, and explained in Western art history texts. Furthermore, it seeks to determine how closely these descriptions align with our current understanding, spanning from the earliest publications on this art to the point when Iranian arts gained political significance and national value. This article aims to introduce and analyze how the distinctive features of Iranian Painting were perceived and reflected in the history of Western art and its evolution. It also examines the role of various scholarly specializations in establishing the history of Iranian painting and shaping contemporary knowledge, focusing on Western sources published between 1876 and 1930.

Research Method

This qualitative research adopts an analytical-descriptive approach and is developmental in purpose. It reviews the evolution of writing the history of Iranian painting through the portrayal of the selection, study, and analysis of its unique characteristics in Western publications in a specific period. It aims not only to explain the evolution of this process but also to address how and to what extent these characteristics have been reflected in the relevant literature. Data collection for this historical research follows a documentary and library-based approach, using the primary sources relevant to the research topic serving as the foundation. The period under examination starts with the publication of the first books, articles, and catalogs on the history of art dedicated to Iran—many of which focus on miniature painting—and extends to the end of Reza Shah Pahlavi's reign, a period when the understanding of Iranian arts entered a new era of historical research and knowledge production influenced by nationalistic tendencies. The study's statistical population comprises publications on the history of Iranian and Islamic art and painting published between 1876 and 1930. The sample population a includes the works of 14 Western authors from the first half of the 20th century (1876-1930), represented in 14 books and catalogs on Iranian art and painting. Case studies were selected from all publications available in the databases of the National Library of Iran, the National Content Consortium, the British National Library, the Leiden University's Digital Library, and websites such as WorldCat and Archive.org.

Research Background

While encompassing all branches of Iranian art, the proceedings of «The Fourth Conference on Theoretical Foundations of Visual Arts with an Art Historiographic Approach» proved the most thematically and methodologically works relevant to this article. In his article «The Europeanisation of Iranian Art Histories», «Afzal Toosi» (2016) Focuses on the challenges of translation in art history publications as one of the key contributors to the limited development of historical writing and research methods in art in the field. Similar to this article, «Moghbeli and Talei» (2016) in «Critical Analysis of Iranian Art Historiography in Foreign and Iranian Books» examine the strengths and weaknesses of common historiographical methods using a descriptive and analytical approach, although they do not focus on the characteristics of one artistic discipline. «Rahimi Pardanjani's» (2016) «Analysis of the Historiography of Iranian Painting Art Based on Historical Sociology» is another similar research; however, his approach to the historiography of Iranian painting art is different. In his thesis «Criticism of Western Historians and Researchers in the Field of Iranian Painting», «Eshghi» (2014) addressed three works by Arthur Pope, Oleg Grabar, and Basil Gray. The key distinctions lie not only in the number of case studies but also in the initial approach to these works and the angle of approach to the problem. Since this thesis seeks to «prove the influence of literature on Iranian painting», it criticises each of the authors' works. «Rashidi Taz» (2014) in his thesis «Criticism of the Methods of Writing Islamic Art Historiography (Aiming to Present a New Method)» shares a similar subject matter to the present study. It examined 9 key publications on the history of Islamic art since the 1990s. In contrast to the present article, it holds a decentralized view of the history of painting and the period under study. This review reveals that the historiography of Iranian painting requires further in-depth analysis and examination of its various dimensions. Additionally, Iranian miniature painting and its characteristics have not been examined thoroughly, the early texts such as catalogs and untranslated sources have not been

reexamined, and a content analysis of many of these works have not been conducted so far. Failure to pay attention to this issue leads researchers to generalize, which we often witness in the historiography of Iranian art. This very point underscores the necessity of a more meticulous review of historical texts and an understanding of how specialists initially engaged with the subject.

Theoretical Structure

Art history has always relied on the critique and analysisof artworks. According to Lionello Venturi, the historian and art critic, one can understand art history as the history of taste with artistic inclinations that identifies itself through the power of ingenuity and justifies itself by art. Therefore, critical assessment can facilitate the development of art history (Venturi, 2005, 27-16). This matter has led to the production of multiple histories, each focusing on a specific aspect of events or artworks. There are significant publications on the historiography of Islamic art. However, their focus lies on a general study of the field and the development of the courses on Islamic art, especially in the United States (Blair & Bloom, 2008), the overall issues and threats in writing history of Islamic art and the importance of rethinking the research methods (Shalem, 2012), and highlighting the lack of research on contemporary histories of Islamic art (Barry Flood, 2007). Meanwhile, the main body of research on the subject still looks into the development of various aspects, including theories, collections and the art market, with a universal approach (Vernoit, 2000). Oleg Grabar divides the study of Islamic art history into seven branches of oriental studies, archaeology, antiquities, art history, architecture history, social sciences, and contemporary inventions (Grabar, 2000). It is unlikely to come across a study, which is solely based on one approach. In most cases, one can detect an overlap of several approaches (Mousa & Al Asad, 2006).

Characteristics of Iranian Miniature Painting

The analysis of artworks is an inextricable element of art history today. It is impossible to categorize, classify, and compare the art of different regions and periods without such an analysis. It is through this process that the defining features of each artistic tradition emerge, distinguishing it from other regions, periods, and schools of art. While this article focuses on how these characteristics have been studied, it is first necessary to outline the recognized features of Iranian miniature painting (as understood today). Some of the main characteristics mentioned for Iranian miniature include the representation of an imaginary world, the illustrative nature and decorative aspect of these paintings as they often accompany texts, and the sense of historical continuity detectable since the earliest works (Eskandarpour Khorrami & Shafiei, 2012). Other visual characteristics include inconsistency with reality, abstractionism, lack of perspective, and the use of bright colors without chiaroscuro (Welch, 2000). These visual features generally disclose a conscious avoidance of realism and are mostly justified as an «abstract perception of the world» that dominated Iranian thinking since ancient times (Pakbaz, 2000, 9) and consequently gave miniature painting its abstract quality. According to scholars who problematize the lack of sufficient studies on «the intrinsic philosophical meaning and symbolism of this art» (Nasr, 1994), this issue stems from Islamic mysticism and its worldview, which is rooted in pre-Islamic Iranian mysticism. This approach is developed by traditionalists, a group of scholars of Islamic art or the followers of the eternal wisdom. One longstanding explanationfor the

deliberate negation of realism is rooted in the conventional prohibition of iconography in Islam. Using this method, the artist legitimized their work, transforming it into a testament to divine presence (Pazouki, 2017, 19-67).

The Study of Iranian Miniature Painting in Pioneering Western Publications

In 1876, nearly half a century after the publication of the first catalog of Iranian art objects in the West, Robert Murdoch Smith's «Persian Art» was released, dedicating an independent chapter to Iranian painting. He was a Scottish serviceman and an engineer who was interested in archaeology and worked in the telegraph office in Iran since 1865. As of 1873 and upon his suggestion, he was commissioned to collect antique objects from all over the country for London's Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum. His «Persian Art» served as an English-language catalog of these acquisitions (Helfgott, 1990, 171-175). Based on his historical view towards art, the main features of Iranian art and painting seemed to be the existence of a sense of cultural and artistic continuity, influenced by its Indo-Aryan and ancient Iranian roots (Murdoch Smith, 1876, 5-1). He also refers to the small size of the paintings and employs the term «miniature» as an equivalent for this branch of painting, pointing to their size. According to him, the best examples of this art are executed on objects such as pencil cases and small wooden boxes (Murdoch Smith, 2020). To him, therefore, the decorative aspect of Iranian miniature seems to be its prominent characteristic. This demonstrates the limits of knowledge about these paintings at the time and how manuscripts had not found their central and important position in the study of miniature painting at this point. Although this book does delve into the characteristics of Iranian miniature, it considers autonomy for Iranian arts along with a sense of historical continuity, marking them as the first references to its characteristics. The second case study is «Catalogue of Specimens Illustrative of Persian and Arab Art Exhibited in 1885» by Henry Wallis, an English painter and a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Following a personal interest in archaeology and antiques, he became a collector and broker of Italian and Islamic historical artefacts (Inglesby, 2020, 2). He compiled the catalog related to the important exhibition of 1885 in Burlington House and paid extra attention to Iranian miniature in this publication. It is the first written work by an artist in English. Apart from mentioning the sense of historical continuity, this work focuses on the visual characteristics of the paintings including the delicate curves, the intricate pattern of flowing lines, and the pure and brilliant colors. Contrary to the naturalism that mostly dominated European art, Wallis considers Iranian art symbolic and non-naturalistic, and although it draws inspiration from nature, it is not an accurate reflection of it. In other words, he acknowledges the imaginative quality of this art and sees the intricate patterns and motifs as expressions of mysticism reflected in Persian literature, particularly those of Rumi's Masnavi (Wallis, 1885, ix-xi). By the beginning of the 20th century, historical studies on Iranian miniature become more popular in the West, especially in England, France, and Germany. Consequently, various experts including orientalists and linguists joined this investigation and significantly contributed to the transformations in the recognition and articulation of the characteristics of Iranian miniatures (Calmard, 2004). For instance, Clément Huart, a French orientalist and holder of the Persian language chair at the École des langues orientales, in 1908 published «Les Calligraphes et les Miniaturistes de l'Orient Musulman». In comparison with the earlier publications, this work has more extensive content and volume. Yet, this book does not pay much attention to the relationship between text and image in manuscripts. Huart considers the features of Islamic and Iranian painting

to be the result of the characteristics of its artists, such as having a delicate hand, a sharp sensorial cognition and eyesight, a lucid mind, a pure spirit, and an exceptional intellectual power. It seems that Huart refers to his observations and perceptions of the transcendental aspects of Islamic painting, but he limits himself to recounting the evidence. In the early decades of the 20th Century, collectors and antiquarians remained the primary authors of Western works on Iranian miniature painting. For example, «The Miniature Painting and Painters of Persia, India and Turkey, from the 8th to 18th Century» by Fredrick Robert Martin, an interpreter at the Swedish diplomatic mission in Constantinople, is one of the most comprehensive works of that time. Following his interest, he collected and studied antique artworks This book in 1912 is published in English in two volumes. The second volume is an appendix with 271 illustrations, mentioned in the first. In this way, Martin succeeded in going beyond simply placing the artworks in a chronological order. To a great extent, he examined them in their cultural and political context and constructed the periodization of miniature painting based on political changes[2]. The author's effort in this book has been directed toward comparing and contrasting Islamic artworks from Iran, Turkey, and India with their contemporaneous works of European and Far-Eastern origins as well as examining influences, inspirations, and interactions in each period. Nevertheless, this effort did not go beyonddescription and never entered the realm of analysis. He considers the Iranian use of colors to be fascinating and, in comparison to Arabic and Mongolian painting, points to the decorative aspect of Iranian painting as well as the elegance of its motifs. Based on these characteristics, Martin believes that Timurid's painting is more authentic and valuable than the works of other periods. Like Huart, Martin also believes that the sole reason for this mastery and delicacy of brushwork was the adherence of Iranian artists and miniaturists to Islam and their abstinence from alcohol, which supposedly enhanced their «visual acuity» and «neural coordination» (Martin, 1912, 39). Simultaneous with Martin's book, Georges Marteau and Henri Vever released «Miniature Persanes», a catalog in French with an introduction and detailed explanations (Marteau & Vever, 1913). This publication is regarded by Blair and Bloom (2009, 154) and other historians (Porter, 2000) to be one of the most important artistic events of its time in Iran . Neither of the book's authors had academic expertise in art history or oriental studies. Georges Marteau (1916-1858) was a graduate of engineering from the École Centrale Paris and a famous collector of Far Eastern art. Henri Vever (1854-1942) was a renowned French Art Nouveau jeweler and a collector of Iranian and Mongolian miniatures, manuscripts, Japanese prints, and impressionist paintings (British Museum, 2012). With the publication of «Miniature Persanes», these two collectors transformed into amateur art analysts and historians. Their catalog classified works based on the historical geography of production and the state of ownership in the 20th century - a matter of particular importance to collectors. In the book's introduction, Marteau and Vever acknowledge that the understanding of Iranian miniature is in its early stages with limited supporting documentation. According to the authors due to the issue of customary restrictions on painting in the Muslim world, including the prohibition of iconography, the decorative aspect of art played a central role and activities such as gilding flourished instead. Throughout the book, the artistic features and the cross-fertilization of the art are only briefly mentioned. For instance, regarding the influence of Chinese art on Iranian miniature, they only mention the use of slanted almond-shaped eyes of the figures and the form of the clouds. Yet, they discussed the specific characteristics of each period in further detail. For example, considering the artworks of the Timurid Era and School of Herat, which were the most valuable to them, they elaborate on the stylistic differences and features of this period

further. They also recognize that, by the early 16th century, a significant transformation had occurred in miniature painting, especially through Kamal al-Din Bihzad, who elevated the art from its primitive state. At this time, characteristics such as the use of more saturated and brighter colors appeared and the designs became more flexible, livelier, and more pleasant. To Marteau and Vever, this trend continued until the mid-17th century and a period of decline was noticeable by the early 18th century because copying older works became widespread and artists tended to imitate Western painting. The authors regarded these events as the endpoint for the history of Iranian miniature painting (Marteau & Vever, 1913, 8-15). It should be noted that while Marteau and Vever make several brief references to color in miniatures, the issue of non-conformity with nature is only indirectly addressed and limited to comparisons between Indian and Iranian works. It seems that these initial comparisons are the first steps in knowing the characteristics of Iranian miniature painting. Another prominent author of this period is Philipp Walter Schulz, a doctor of law with exceptional proficiency in Persian language and literature. Schulz travelled to Iran for the first time in the fall of 1897 and spent two years visiting the country, collecting valuable historical and anthropological objects (Gierlichs, 2013, 216-221). Later, Schulz narrowedhis collection to manuscripts and miniatures, which paved the way for his magnum opus:the two-volume «Die persisch-islamische Miniaturmalerie: Ein Beitrag zurKunstgeschichte Irans» in 1914 in German. According to experts, this work is the first comprehensive study of its kind on Iranian miniature painting. Regarding the unique characteristics of Iranian miniature, the author believes it is impossible to understand this art without knowledge of Muslim life because the aesthetic foundations for Iranian art are different from those of Western art. He compares the status of calligraphy and painting in Islamic and Christian cultures and acknowledges that Iranian miniatures were mainly developed to serve the texts and calligraphy. However, Shulz does not consider painting simply as a decorative art or a handicraft and does not diminish the status of the Iranian painter as a manuscript illustrator. Also, regarding the symbolism of colors, as he compares this art with Indian painting, he maintains that the Iranian examples are brighter and more luminous. The most significant part of Shultz's book, which can be considered as the first written document regarding the explanation of the characteristics of Iranian painting, is the fifth chapter of his book: «Wesen und Charaker» (nature and characteristics). Here, for the first time, he comprehensively describes the indicators to distinguish Iranian miniature from European classical paintings. By comparing pre- and post-Islamic Iranian paintings and the limitations of painting, he recognized a kind of duality and internal contradiction that «restrains the artist from developing rich imagination». Consequently, he argues, Iranian artists were compelled to rely on metaphors and symbolism. In addition to the metaphorical aspect of this art, he points out the avoidance of the rules of perspective. According to him, it is this «liberation from spatial reality» that empowers the artist to showcase his talent in composition and place the objects as he sees fit. Schultz also mentions the absence of shadows and the complete surrounding of the frame with light, another consequence of the Iranian miniaturist's detachment from realism. Ultimately, the most important aspect of this book is that it points out the fundamental and aesthetic differences between Iranian miniature and Western painting for the first time. Additionally, it is Schulz who, for the first time, argues that studying this art by Western standards is not futile. In this regard, he discusses the characteristics of Iranian painting while his analytical view on «the decorative aspect of painting» is not reductive (Schulz, 1914, 1-29). During the First World War (1914-1918), up to the first half of the 1920s, the study of Iranian miniature transformed under the influence of linguists and orientalists such as Williams Jackson and Abraham Yohannan in

Europe. Their publications mainly focus on language and a more detailed study of the manuscripts, blurring the focus on paintings and redirecting their art history towards the relationship between the text and the illustration. Abraham Yohannan was a scholar of oriental languages, religions, and philosophy and a professor of oriental languages at Columbia University with outstanding command of Persian. Williams Jackson was also a professor of Indo-European languages, interested in local Iranian traditions and contextual studies. They published several works on Persian and Pahlavi languages and Avestan texts. Their only work to approach the subject of art and to relate to Persian painting is the volume entitled «A Catalogue of the Collection of Persian Manuscripts Including Also Some Turkish and Arabic presented to the Metropolitan Museum of Art», compiled in English in 1914 for the collection of the American collector Alexander Smith Cochran, a catalog of the American Alexander Smith Cochran's collection. In this book, manuscripts were not merely considered valuable museum objects - their content, themes and original purpose of creation were considered far more important than their appearance. Examination of characteristics we now associate with Persian painting appears rarely and in scattered sentences throughout the work. The authors primarily traced Chinese artistic influences on Persian art. For instance, in describing an early 15th century manuscript of Nizami's Khamsah, they mention the excessive use of bright colors in the illustrations, which was against the principles of Chinese painting. The study of Iranian manuscripts and paintings until the end of the second decade of the 20th century would not be complete without discussing Edgar Blochet's works, though his numerous works rarely go beyond the form of descriptive catalogues. Having studied Arabic in Paris, he acquired a wealth of knowledge about Iranian painting during his collaboration with the Manuscripts Department of the National Library of France (Richard, 1989). According to him, Iranian painting reached a significant height in the Timurid era, and Blochet avoids using the terms «miniature» and «miniaturist» prior to this period; as if he has a definition for both terms in mind that does not apply to paintings before the Timurid period and the emergence of the Shiraz school. Another noteworthy, yet indirect, observation concerns the relationship between Persian literature and manuscript illustrations, particularly the parallel decline of Persian literature during the reign of Shah Abbas II and Iranian miniature (Blochet, 1920, 99-101). In another work, «Peintures de Manuscrits Arabes, Persans et Turcs de la Bibliothèque Nationale» (1911), he briefly mentions the inimitable perfectionism in design and the use of glorious colors (Blochet, 1911, 4). With the beginning of the Pahlavi era, the new political atmosphere in Iran led to the expansion of cultural studies and a significant growth of information about the arts of Iran, including painting. Numerous works were publishedduring this period that would later be translated into Persian and form the foundational sources for the history of Iranian painting and miniature art. . Basil Gray, who served as Keeper of Oriental Antiquities at the British Museum, emerged as one of the most prominent scholars of Iranian miniature. He was an Asian art history specialist who mainly focused on Iranian art (Rogers, 2012). The influence of his academic field -classical sciences and modern history- can also be traced in his writings. One of his goals for publishing a book on Iranian painting was to unfold the value of studying Iranian miniature and provide an introduction to this art (Gray, 1930, v). His intention was, in essence, to lay the groundwork for more focused and comprehensive future scholarship. Considering the significance of this book within the field of Iranian art history, along with the prominent position held by its Persian translation from English, published in 1975, it can be asserted that this objective was successfully realized, one must acknowledge that this goal has been achieved. Like his predecessor, Gray highlighted the decorative aspect of Iranian miniature

in the introduction. However, he delved deeper into introducing other characteristics of Iranian miniature in this book. The description of these features begins by comparing the relationship between the art of painting and religion in Iran with Christian lands, stressing its less central role in the Islamic tradition. Gray begins the identification of these features by introducing the Sasanian and Manichaean roots of Iranian miniatures and considers Iranian miniature throughout history as a royal art with a decorative quality that is dependent on calligraphy and has no public function. Gray assumed periods of rise, peak and decline in the history of Iranian miniature. He revealed that this art had reached its limits of perfection, through using exquisite colors. He also named the lack of shadowing as well as lack of adherence to the rules of perspective as the other visual characteristics of miniature painting. He attributes the appearance of these qualities to the precedence of the theme of the painting over the painter's viewpoint. In other words, he prioritizes the underlying universal meanings in the painting over the personality and worldview of the artist himself. Like Blochet, he considers Timurid paintings the first specimens of miniature painting and highlights their deliberate avoidance of the rules of perspective. He understood this as a solution to direct the observer's gaze from one point to another while explaining the whole story in one frame. Gray did not directly mention the fantasy aspect of miniatures; he only disclosed the visual conditions related to this quality. This ambiguity in defining the features of miniature painting (at least until the 1930s) may stem from approaching the subject through non-art historical lenses like Orientalism, linguistics, and collecting rather than specialized art historical analysis and methodological comparisons. Since the second half of the 1920s, studies on Iranian miniature painting mostly inclined towards its relationship with literature and writers such as Laurence Binyon started working on this art. Binyon was an English poet, translator, and critic interested in painting (Loloi, 2002). Starting to work in the Department of Oriental Paintings at the British Museum in 1893, he pursued his two fields of interest side by side, publishing his first book on Oriental art in 1908, and his first work on Iranian miniature in the chapter «Painting in Persia» in «The Poems of Nizami» (Binyon, 1928, 7). He also published a chapter titled «Painting» (Binyon, 1930, 67-73) in «Persian Art», a collection of essays edited by Edward Denison Ross. Binyon's «The Poems of Nizami» focuses on literature. Here, in the chapter ‘Painting in Persia’, he mentions the decorative aspect of the miniature paintings, depicting themes from the material world, yet these themes are represented in another «strange» and «radiant» world with no attempt to render the light and shade of nature. Also, following Edward G. Browne's account, he states that Eastern people admire «the marvellous» and this «romantic temperament is reflected in an art which loves to place the personages it depicts in the enhancement of wonderful settings». He also mentions the lack of perspective and the unique composition of these illustrations. By referring to the mystical aspect of Iranian literature, Binyon states that «the mysticism in which Persian poetry is steeped could find no pictorial counterpart». Instead, he considers the art of Iranian painting, which was formed under the patronage of government officials, focused on everyday subjects as these subjects were formed in a mythical world with unearthly beauty (Binyon, 1928, 8-15). Two years later, and in his article «Painting» for the book «Persian Art», Binyon identifies the Timurid period and Behzad's works as the golden age of Persian painting, which gradually declined by the end of the Safavid era due to growing European influences. To him, it is in this flourishing period that the unique characteristics of this art are revealed. He highlights several key elements including an unconventional system of perspective and elevating the horizon, the richness of the decorative details, and the use of elaborated patterns and luxurious colors. In the meantime, he has sporadically mentioned the characteristics of Iranian painting and

believes that «no other art in the world has quite this enchanted air, this splendor of romance». He points out that painting in Iran was generally under the influence of calligraphy and is not a religious art per se. The repetition of certain illustrated scenes across different manuscripts, he argues, constitutes one of Iranian painting's defining characteristics (Binyon, 1930, 62-69). In the concluding sentences of his work, the author briefly touches upon the imaginary, magical, and otherworldly beauty of Iranian painting, offering only a fleeting poetic allusion to its immaterial qualities in the final lines. He had spoken about the unreal world of these paintings more than anyone up to this point, yet he clearly separated it from the mystical world of literature. In these two articles, except for a few references to Browne's account of the Eastern civilizations, he does not mention the representation of such a world in the illustrations. Another literary figure of this period who focused on Iranian miniature was Mulk Raj Anand, the renowned short story writer and critic. He published several volumes on different aspects of culture in South Asia including painting while he was studying at the University of Cambridge. His «Persian Painting» is a lengthy paper on the history of painting in Iran, which, as compared to previous works, has paid more attention to the Sassanian roots of this art. He believed the rise of Iranian miniature happened after the Mongol conquest, the influence of which lingered for a long while. It is in the works of Bihzad that he sees the height of the formation of its characteristics, including its harmonious use of rich and bright colors with its compositional perfection. Enthralled by Behzad, Anand views his works as the culmination of conceptual mastery and technical skill, proposing that Behzad's stylistic traits—such as intricate detailing and idealized forms—define Persian painting across all eras. By pointing at the romanticism embedded in Iranian arts, he declared that Sufism had permeated the very essence of Iranian life and, and deeply influenced Bihzad's oeuvre. He identifies the «element of divine love» in Behzad's works, linking it to the spiritual undercurrents of Persian culture. For later artists, Anand notes the continued vibrancy of color saturation and luminosity as defining features. To him, the most significant characteristic of Persian painting is its lyrical sensibility, which creates unreal, dreamlike spaces and forges a closer bond with the mystical themes of Persian literature. In his view, Behzad is the first scholar to explicitly propose a direct connection between Iranian mysticism and miniature painting—at least during Behzad's era—though he provides no concrete evidence to substantiate this claim (Anand, 1930, 7-34). The 1930s saw a surge in publications on Iranian art and archaeology, including Iranian miniature. Supported by the new Pahlavi Dynasty, several researchers came to Iran after the abolition of the French monopoly on archaeological excavations. Among the first and most influential groups was a team led by the American art historian Arthur Opham Pope and his wife, Phyllis Ackerman, and their accompanying team. Pope was a philosophy graduate from Brown University specializing in aesthetics. In the early 1920s, he became the head consultant of Islamic art at the Art Institute of Chicago and the consultant of Iranian art at The University of Pennsylvania Museum (Siver, 2005). In «An Introduction to Persian Art Since The seventh century A.D» , Pope devotes the opening chapter to foundational topics, including the historical background and the factors shaping Iranian art. From the second chapter onward, he examines various branches of Iranian art, notably manuscript illumination, which also incorporates discussions on painting. Pope points to the decorative aspect as the first feature of Iranian miniature in the sense that various elements such as the magnificent trees are repeated in all different art forms from carpet designs s to book illustrations. According to him, such decorative elements have provided artists with motifs that are broad in range and adaptable, quite similar to the syntax of a language. Also, the artists' high imagination and

genius have created a variety of calculated compositions to decorate the pages. He also points to the flatness of compositions, lack of realism, absence of natural light, shadow and perspective, non-conformity and intersection of figures and colors, non-use of color tonality, and the creation of a dispersed composition (with multiple focal points) as distinguishing features of Iranian painting. In his opinion, these qualities in Iranian miniature painting have led to the creation of an abstract world. This proposition differs from the statements of some previous scholars such as Anand, who identified Iranian literature and mysticism or religious restrictions that formed these features in painting. To Pope, «the surrender of plasticity, distance and atmosphere permits the presentation of an abstract world which has its own values, requires its own consistencies, and is sustained by its own imagination. […] This abstractness, which is a simplification, concentrates attention on particular images, endowing them with a heightened actuality». In other words, Pope considers such deliberate nonconformity with nature to represent a higher order of reality. He does not directly point to the imaginary world of Iranian mysticism or the fantasy embedded in Persian literature. He considers the core purpose of miniature paintings to express the feelings, emotions, and conditions of the depicted characters. Pope mainly focuses on the modes of composition, mentioning the reduction of color areas, balanced or semi-balanced repetitions of motifs, and the interplay of dynamic lines with static decorative patterns as alternatives to usual methods of color blending or tonal gradation methods for maintaining the painting's integrity. Pope briefly touches on other characteristics such as the sense of visual stability or the regal nature of Iranian painting. He also points out the relationship between illustrations and manuscript texts, not considering them as additional images to illustrate the manuscripts, but rather as complementary and integral to the book's content. Most importantly, he briefly mentions the success of Iranian artists such as Aqa Mirak and Sultan Muhammad in depicting complex and extraterrestrial subjects such as the ascension of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) compared to the paintings of other lands and considers this success in creating such scenes to be the result of the power of imagination of the artists. It is through this powerful imagination that the painter becomes a true artist (Pope, 1930, 99-112).

Conclusion

The evolution of Iranian miniature historiography from the late 19th Century to the 1930s as well as the discovery and articulation of its unique characteristics emerged from the disciplinary approaches of various scholars studying Iranian art. Notably, the field of «art history» itself and its analytical approach contributed least to this process. Our current knowledge of the features of this art and its diversity is based on various fields of study, including archaeology, oriental studies, antiquities, and linguistics. Due to the comparative nature of their field and attention to the physical and visual qualities of the object, archaeologists and orientalists were the first scholars who discovered the autonomous identity of this art. They also found its roots and highlighted the Chinese influence and, more importantly, realized the use of vibrant colors as a key characteristic of Iranian miniature. Along with them, the antiquarians and collectors amasssed large quantities of specimens that resulted in the discovery of stylistic developments and periods of flourishing and decline for Iranian miniature. Meanwhile, linguists inclined towards uncovering crucial text-image relationships, recognized decorative aspects as fundamental features, noted the deliberate avoidance of realism, and attempted to rationalize these artistic choices. This interdisciplinary convergence gradually formed our understanding of Iranian miniature and

diverged the focus from superficial observations (like technical use of color) to qualitative analysis of deeper artistic principles. The primary and most significant characteristic is the «conscious departure from naturalism», under which other features such as «use of vibrant colors», «absence of chiaroscuro», and «non-adherence to perspective principles» can be categorized. The second important characteristic is its decorative quality and the third is the use of the term miniature, which refers to the size of these paintings. Dealing with the works as artistic masterpieces and their objectification has dominated the study of this art and influenced the recognition of its characteristics, especially in the works of orientalists. This study also shows how the accessibility of specimens has been a pivotal factor in identifying these characteristics. The researchers and authors examined in this study based their conclusions on scattered and often incomplete collections accessible to them, rather than comprehensive surveys encompassing all stylistic and school variations of miniature painting. They generalized findings from these limited samples to the entire tradition, despite the need for case-specific analysis. This underscores the necessity of rigorous scholarly examination and precise identification of unique characteristics in any artistic tradition, including Iranian miniature painting. Clearly, our understanding remains evolutionary, and apart from repeated examination of surviving works and re-evaluation of what we currently take for granted, there exists no alternative path for studying the historiography of this art form's development. The field demands continuous reassessment of both artifacts and foundational assumptions to achieve more nuanced comprehension.

Author Contributions

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Appendix

1. If we consider the Persian term «tārīkhnegārī» as the lexical equivalent of the term «historiography», we should consider the double meanings of the term in English. The English term found a new meaning later, referring to the theories of history and the study of how histories are written. It seems, however, that in most Persian texts «tārīkhnegārī» is still used with its pre-modern connotation. To differentiate between these two concepts and align with contemporary specialized and international interpretations of historiography, this article refers to the act of «writing history» and «historian» «negāresh-e tārīkh» and «movarrekh», respectively, while the terms «historiography» and «historiographer» will be used for the updated sense of the term.
2. This periodization includes the Mongol period, the Timurid period, the Abbasid period, and the 18th-19th centuries.

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